

Celiac Disease

Celiac disease is a medical condition caused by an abnormal immune response to gluten, a protein found in several grains. An immune response protects you from bacteria, viruses, and foreign substances. Grains containing gluten include wheat, rye, triticale, and barley. Gluten is also found in many processed and packaged foods. An estimated one in 133 Canadians is said to have celiac disease.

The immune response to gluten can affect different parts of your body and cause a wide range of symptoms, including anemia and fatigue. Damage to the small intestine is common and prevents your body from absorbing nutrients needed for good health. This can cause nutritional problems and symptoms such as diarrhea, abdominal pain, and bloating.

Patients with celiac disease cannot tolerate gluten and must follow a lifelong gluten-free diet. Celiac disease is different than *gluten sensitivity*. People with gluten sensitivity have many symptoms when they eat gluten and feel better on a gluten-free diet. However, they do not have an abnormal immune response to gluten or damage to their intestines.

The diagnosis of celiac disease is made in two stages:

1. *Blood test:* The first step in diagnosis is a simple blood test to screen for the presence of antibodies, or immune system proteins, that develop in most people with celiac disease.
2. *Biopsy:* A biopsy, or tissue sample, is required to make an accurate diagnosis of celiac disease. The biopsy is taken from the small intestine to check for the typical damage caused by celiac disease. The biopsy is taken during a procedure known as endoscopy. During endoscopy, a flexible tube with a light and camera is passed through your mouth and esophagus into your stomach and small intestine. The doctor will look at your small intestine and take several tiny tissue samples to be checked for damage under a microscope. You would normally receive a sedative before endoscopy.

Your doctor makes a diagnosis of celiac disease by considering the results of your blood tests, endoscopy, and biopsy, along with your symptoms.

No cure has been found for celiac disease. A lifelong gluten-free diet effectively relieves the symptoms of celiac disease. A gluten-free diet also prevents more damage to the small intestine and allows healing to take place. Sticking to a gluten-free diet means avoiding all grains containing gluten—wheat, rye, triticale, and barley. However, you may be able to eat oats if they are uncontaminated by gluten. You must also be alert to hidden sources of gluten in processed and packaged foods and in drug products. That means reading all food and drug labels, all the time. A dietitian is an important resource, who can teach you how to maintain a nutritious diet while removing gluten from your diet. Your health care provider will continue to monitor your health regularly to ensure you have no nutritional or related problems.

Source: Canadian Celiac Association (<http://www.celiac.ca/>)

The Canadian Celiac Association is an excellent resource with a wealth of information about living well with celiac disease. A variety of patient information resources, including an electronic newsletter, can be found at <http://glutenfreediet.ca/>.

